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Housekeeper's Chat

Tuesday, December 9, 1930

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U. S. Department of Agriculture

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "Kitchen Window Boxes." Advice on how to raise such flavorings and garnishes as parsley, mint, chives, sweet basil, and so forth, in the kitchen window box; questions and answers. Information from Bureaus of Plant Industry and Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

Bulletins available: "Floors and Floor Coverings;" "Home Baking."

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W.R.B., my friend the Garden Specialist, of the Department of Agriculture, is responsible for the subject of today's talk. Not long ago, I called on W. R. B. to answer some questions about houseplants.

He answered the questions, and also told me how I might raise such plants as parsley and mint in my kitchen window box, and use them as flavorings and garnishes, in the winter-time.

Maybe you don't think garnishes are important. I know I'm tempted to leave them off, when I'm extremely busy. The other day I read something about the importance of serving food attractively. Lunch room and cafeteria managers have found if they serve two dishes, of the same food, exactly alike, except for a garnish or a bit of color, the most attractive food is always selected first.

According to this article, "If you do not believe in this magic influence of color, form, and general esthetic value of food, consider the origin, the instant success, and the enormous popularity, of the Ice Cream Sundae. It is the same story of the nameless gingerbread man, compared with the identical mixture, baked in the same old way, and served on the same old plate. Many of us have never outgrown the age of the gingerbread man, though the feeling now manifests itself in many different ways.

"French pastry owes much of its charm to a similar psychological process. With a fancy name, aristocratic decorations, and impressive presentation, by an obliging waiter, in a fashionable eating place, familiar dishes frequently assume the role of something mysteriously clever, and quite beyond the thought of domestic duplication. Analysis often proves the contrary. The basic recipe you find you probably know, and all the attractive effects of garnishes and decoration, can easily be reproduced, in your own kitchen."

That's all of the article. Now I'll tell you what W.R.B., the Garden Specialist, has to say about growing flavorings and garnishes in the window box. To begin with, he informed me that he had tried my recipe for an omelet, the other day. He said, "It certainly was fine. The only thing you failed to

mention, in connection with the omelet, was to garnish it, on the platter, with one or two sprigs of parsley. I..... suppose that it would taste just as good without the parsley, but I always like that touch of decoration, you might call it.

"Some people think it is too much trouble to order parsley from the store, and keep it wrapped in a moist cloth, in the ice-box. We get around the trouble of keeping the parsley, by having two or three plants growing in our kitchen window-box. You see, we have a large south window, in our kitchen where it is always warm and sunshiny, when the sun shines. Each fall, we fill the box with the very best soil, and plant all sorts of flavoring and garnishing plants in it. Just now, we have parsley, mint, sweet basil, and chives, all growing in our kitchen window-box. It does seem odd, that plants, belonging to so many different families, would get along together, but they do.

"Parsley is one of the easiest plants to grow in the window-box. It takes only two or three plants to furnish all the leaves you need during the winter, for garnishing. We always have a row of parsley in the garden during the summer. Late in the fall, we simply lift three or four nice plants, with a little soil adhering to their roots, and plant them in the window-box.

"But before going further, perhaps I had better tell you how this window-box is built. First, I had a carpenter make a wooden box, of 7/8 inch cypress boards. The box is 8 inches wide, 7 inches deep, inside measurements, and just long enough to fit the window. Next, I took the box to a tinner and had it lined with galvanized iron. The seams are soldered, so that the box will hold water. About an inch from the bottom, I had the tinner insert a false bottom, with a number of holes punched in it. At one corner he inserted a tube, through which the water can be poured into the bottom of the box, and fitted with a rubber cork. Then I had two brackets fastened to the window sill. After the box was completed I painted it, to harmonize with the walls. This was all done during the summer. The box containing the soil and plants, was kept in the garden, until nearly time for early fall frosts.

"Now, going back to the plants. We have a mint-bed in the garden, from which we cut mint for our iced tea during the summer. A few sprays of the mint, with the roots attached, were planted in the box. They furnish mint for flavoring, especially for making mint sauce in the winter time.

Water cress, another of our important garnishes, can be grown indoors if the right conditions are provided. Most people think that water cress can be grown only in shallow water. As a matter of fact, it will grow fairly well on soil, provided the surface is kept reasonably moist and it has some lime in the soil to keep it alkaline. For this reason water cress should not be grown in the same box with parsley, mint, and other plants which require a soil that is neutral or very slightly acid, and for that reason would be injured by applications of lime.

I simply buy a small bunch of water cress on the market and stand it in a dish in a little water to which a pinch of lime has been added. In a few days the roots begin to form, then I plant these little sprouts of water cress in a special window box and water them with water to which a teaspoon of hydrated lime has been added to each gallon of water, or if you do not want to go to the trouble of adding lime to the water just sprinkle a little, and a very little, hydrated lime, over the surface of the soil in

which the water cress is growing about once every 3 or 4 weeks then use the ordinary water as it comes from the faucet or the well for watering the plants. The box containing the water cress should be placed in a window where it will get sunshine at least a part of the day, and where it will not be too warm.

"Some folks like the leaves of sweet basil, for flavoring. Sweet basil can be grown in the window-box.

One of the easiest plants to grow in the window-box is chives, which, as you know, is a little onion, the tender tops of which are used for flavoring stews, and other dishes. If you have chives growing in the garden, it is an easy matter to cut out a block of earth, which is thickly set with the plants, and place it in one end of the window-box. If you don't happen to have them growing, you can buy a clump of the plants at the seedstore, or on the market, and plant them in the window-box. They will grow in the south window, and it does not seem to matter how much you cut their leaves for flavoring purposes -- more leaves will grow to take their places.

"Once in a while, say about every 30 days. I water the plants in my kitchen window-box with water, to which a little nitrate of soda has been added. Use about a level teaspoonful of nitrate of soda, in ^a quart of water. Pour this all over the surface of the soil. For the regular watering of the box, however, I simply pour water down the tube in the corner of the box, and allow the moisture to rise in the soil. After watering, I always remove the cork, and drain off the water, as it is likely to become stagnant. It does not do to have the bottom soil wet all the time.

"A kitchen-window garden of this kind may seem trifling, but you will be surprised, to see the quantity of materials it supplies, for flavoring and garnishing the dishes, that are prepared for the table."

That concludes W.R.B.'s talk. If you have any questions about house-plants, send them to me. I'll forward them to W. R. B. He will send you a personal answer, and perhaps some printed information on vegetable and flower gardens, if you ask for it.

Here's a question about rugs from a reader who has evidently never seen our bulletin on Floors and Floor Coverings. I advise her to send for it, as it contains a great deal of other useful information. She asks:

"What can be done with a small axminster or velvet rug which wrinkles, and curls up at the edges?"

Your small axminster or velvet rug wrinkles, and curls up at the edges, because the sizing has worn off the back. Re-sizing will make the rug wear longer, and look much better. Stretch the rug tight and true. Tack it, at frequent intervals, face down, on the floor, or some other flat surface, where it can remain undisturbed. Then sprinkle it, generously, with a solution made by soaking and dissolving one-fourth of a pound of flake glue, in a half gallon of water, in a double boiler. The rug should dry, for at least 24 hours, after it is sprinkled with this solution. If your rug is light weight, be careful not to put on so much glue that it comes through, on the right side.

And another listener wants a good recipe for Christmas cookies. I will not try to broadcast this recipe, for it is in the bulletin Home Baking, and I am sure my listener will want several other good recipes contained in that publication.

So that's all for today. Tomorrow, "Toys to Fit the Child."

Wednesday - "Toys to Fit the Child."

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